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# Beatification of Father Laval: Homily of the Bishop of Port Louis (St Mary Major)

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**THE HOMILY OF MGR. MARGEOT  
BISHOP OF PORT-LOUIS, AT ST MARY MAJOR  
(THE PRINCIPAL POINTS)  
the 30<sup>th</sup> April**

**FOREWORD**

*In the course of his address on the occasion of the First Mass in honour of Blessed Jacque-Desiré Laval, having expressed joy and thanksgiving to God, Bishop Margéot took the opportunity to thank a great variety of people who had contributed to this memorable day. He expressed gratitude to the Holy Father for accepting personally to declare Father Laval "Blessed"; the Postulator, Vice-Postulator and Procurator to the Holy See, who had worked so hard to this end. He thanked Cardinal Gantin for accepting to preside the celebrations in Mauritius; the Mauritians themselves, come in great number from the four corners of the globe and especially from the Island of Mauritius itself for the Beatification, with a particularly warm appreciation of the 50-strong Official Delegation led by the Prime Minister and so very ecumenical in composition. He also welcomed Bishop Aubry of Reunion whose presence symbolised the unity and solidarity of the Church in the Indian Ocean. He expressed similar sentiments with regard to the pilgrims representative of the Church of Normandy, led by their Bishop, Mgr Honoré. He had a special word of congratulation and of thanks for the Holy Ghost Fathers in the person of the Superior General and his Assistants. It was the Holy Ghost Fathers who gave Father Laval to Mauritius and who continued to develop what he had begun in the years that followed to this day; he expressed particular gratitude to the Irish Province and to his illustrious predecessors in the See of Port Louis, Bishops Murphy, Leen and Liston, the latter still happily with us.*

*Here we retain only the kernel of his homily insofar as it seems to have a very pertinent and contemporary message for us.*

"Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven". (MATT. V, 2)

"Father Laval is Blessed because he was one of those poor of whom it is said that their heritage will be the Kingdom of God. It is in this first of the Beatitudes that we discover the secret, the essential, of the apostolic life of Father Laval. With it we at once associate the word spoken by St Paul to the Corinthians, an echo of Christ Himself: 'God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty' (I Cor I,27); and again: 'Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong'.

Father Laval, from the beginning of his missionary life, was fully convinced that it was the under-privileged and the oppressed, the poor and the humble who were most ready to welcome the Kingdom of God.

To announce the Good News of Jesus Christ, the missionary Jacques-Desiré Laval had no need of human eloquence nor the persuasive arguments of human wisdom: in his personal life-style and in his methods of evangelisation, he had deliberately embraced poverty, because that left the field free for God to manifest His power".

## POVERTY IN HIS PERSONAL LIFE

1. "Father Laval chose to live in a small house in Port Louis, whose door was always open. He welcomed all who came, but especially the poor, with affectionate kindness. He lived modestly, ate little and dressed simply.

2. He attached great importance to prayer and fasting: 'Day by day I learn', he wrote, 'that souls are not snatched from the devil by the use of fine words but only through prayer and fasting'. He insisted upon personal prayer and mortification because that is the approach par excellence of the poor man, that is the attitude of the man who like our father, Abraham, finds his support in God. The poor man in prayer opens the way to the action of God's power, which is made manifest in human weakness.

3. Father Laval lived the first five years of his ministry in what has been described as 'the dynamic of the provi-

sional'. That is to say, he lived with that lack of security experienced by so many immigrant people to-day, the illegal entrants, the ones without papers! In those early years he lived under a constant threat of expulsion from the civil authority of the day: he could at any time have been ordered to leave the country, to take the first boat home. Here again, in this uncertainty, God's power is made manifest.

4. Father Laval was also the victim of misunderstanding on the part of Superiors and was refused the helpers he so urgently asked for. His Religious Superior would accuse him of spending too much time in apostolic work and not enough in the regular exercises of his religious community: he was accused of being too much a missionary, too little a religious!

5. Misunderstood by Superiors, opposed by the well-to-do, who looked with disapproval on his work for the poorest of the community, Father Laval must have felt very much alone, virtually abandoned by those who should have been closest to him. In his weakness, he would turn to God for strength".

## POVERTY IN MEANS OF EVANGELISATION

"Poverty in his personal life was wedded to poverty in the means of evangelisation adopted by Father Laval. 'And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom', said St Paul to the Corinthians (I Cor. II, 1); 'for ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble are called: but, God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things that are mighty'. (I Cor I, 26-28).

1. The catechists that Father Laval chose, and the collaborators male and female he familiarly called 'his counsellors', recall those Corinthians whom Paul reminded of their poverty and humble origins. He himself first learnt Creole, the language of the freed slaves, the poorest members of society. He then quickly showed his confidence in these people. They were the ones he chose to be apostles to their brethren: to them he confided the administration of the fraternal charity fund that would become eventually 'The Mutual Assistance Society'.

It was these also who, at Port Louis and St Julien, from Petite-Riviere to Mahébourg, undertook the construction of small chapels at the different centres where people lived. More than forty of these were built in 3 years under the guidance of Father Laval and some of his collaborators. Again God's hand was at work, supplementing human weakness.

2. The poor are evangelised by the poor. Then, their witness, their authenticity begins to attract the interest of the better-off around them, the ruling classes of the day. It was customary in the colonial society of the time for mothers to confide the care of their babies to foster-mothers and they were quick to notice and admire the effect of conversion on them. It was often also the domestic servants who persuaded their masters to call a priest to administer the Last Sacraments. It was a time in which the presence of a priest at the bed-side of a dying person was looked on with dread. Moved by the conduct of their employees, many of those in easy circumstances, who no longer practised their religion, asked humbly if they too could seek the help of Father Laval.

3. In this way, the influence of Father Laval spread to other classes of Christians, practising and non-practising. Gradually the circle of conversions grew larger: it is estimated that Father Laval converted and baptised more than 60,000 persons! Gradually too about his person an action of unity grew. Like a stone in the water, which sets up ever-wider circles, Father Laval reached out and touched the Hindu immigrants new-come to the Island. Some he even received into the Church. To-day, more than 100 years after his death, his influence is felt by practically every section of the Mauritian people. The truth is that our Mauritian compatriots, Hindu, Moslem and Buddhist, all recognise Father Laval as truly a man of God. All the year round they come to pray at his tomb. Mauritians of different faiths and cultures stand side-by-side fraternally one in their veneration of him whom already they call their 'saint' Father Laval ... ».

## CONCLUSION

"What message has Father Laval for all of you, responsible for the national life, and through you for our island of Mau-

ritius? It seems, in point of fact, that given the diversity of our different communities, ethnical and cultural, the divisions that separate our compatriots on the social and political level, that Father Laval calls us all to find anew a yeast of unity, a leaven that will draw us all together. But which?

Perhaps, we can suggest that this yeast, this leaven, may be found in the faith in God that so deeply animates the majority of our fellow-countrymen. We are a RELIGIOUS people. We believe in a God, whose existence we recognise. Saints, who like Father Laval, live close to God, are a reflection of His holiness. They are for us witnesses, pointing to a unity, a coming together of all, beyond and above the limits of ethnological groupings, of cultures and races. Yes, holiness is the only bond of unity, and we conclude thanking Father Laval for having traced that path of unity for our people".